

"There's A Little Dark Shack"

To Sir Winston Churchill's popular expression, "At the summit," I should like to add—not without malice—an expression of my own, "In the ravine."

This will give you some notion of the jollity and unconquerable spirit that prevail in the Brooklyn office of The New York Times.

Put it this way: The Brooklyn office of The Times, known as the "shack," is no Taj Mahal. It lurks in the shadows of Brooklyn Police Headquarters looking as though it expected to be arrested for vagrancy. It is on Bergen Street near Flatbush Avenue.

I cower in the shack waiting for disaster to strike somewhere in the borough. It does not matter where, and the worse the better. My function is to be on hand *just in case*.

My job consists of unlocking the front door—by which I do not mean to imply that there is also a back door—every day at 11:30 A. M. (It sounds like a lark, I know, but I have eight keys on my ring, no seven of which open that door. Some mornings I have sixteen keys in matched sets of two.) Then I have to plug in the electric fan and the police radio. After that I have to open my Early Industrial Revolution coat locker. Finally, I try to open my desk drawer. It sticks.

I call the city desk and tell them: "This is John Phillips in Brooklyn." I am switched to Mr. Potter on the city desk. He says: "Good morning, John." I tell him that a sweet old lady on Livonia Avenue has poured gasoline on her son-in-law. He tells me: "Get something on it."

This means a call to precinct headquarters where a sleepy detective tells me that it happened during the last shift, that he ain't on the case, that there's no one around who is, and that the dead man was found in a charred wicker rocking chair. This he considers the substance of the story and is persuaded only with extreme difficulty to commit himself further. If the old lady happens to have been a sock-knitter for servicemen, I must drag additional information out of the detective, one tooth at a time.

In the span of a glacial age it is possible to gain enough information to put together a D head (two-paragraph piece) that will appear at the head of the second galley of the night's overset. The Daily News leads with the story, The Mirror is unable to find a font of type big enough to tell it, and The Herald Tribune may go a column on page one. Only The Times keeps its head.

The point is that I am learning. Already I have learned that precinct detec-

tives do not get a bang out of being addressed as "Dick Tracy." I have begun to grasp that the Brooklyn office is to anonymity what the Metropolitan is to opera—that is to say, everything.

To friends outside the office who are slow to understand that district reporting is not the high road to glory, I am forced to explain that my stuff appears in the paper under the name "Abe Raskin." This, of course, is not true. But it has social value.

District reporting, you learn, is largely a waiting game. Most of the time



John M. Phillips

I sit around reading Dante Gabriel Rossetti and listening to police calls.

Policemen are remarkable linguists. They do their calls in hundreds of languages, none of which owe any debt to English. Add to this the fact that police radios are manufactured by lunatic children of Mau Mau tribesmen and you get a faint idea. It is like learning to talk all over again.

"Oyez? Kritz und mit der frakschund ged breischwene, corner of Broadway and Van Sinderin Avenue. Tout est perdu fors l'honneur! Arrest all persons in turquoise cummerbunds. Ten four!"

There is no such place as the corner of Broadway and Van Sinderin Avenue. Everything happens at the junction of two streets which either do not exist or which do not come within three miles of one another at any point.

May 9 was my first day on the Brooklyn shack job. I had come up from the lavishly appointed Washington bureau where I had played no role in the procuring of the Yalta papers, though that is not the way my friends heard it. I had just got the shack door open and was listening to the curlew's cry when

the reporters next door streamed out of their office like men fleeing molten lava.

"C'mon," one of them said.

We piled into the car like the multitude of Ringling Brothers clowns, and were driven by a man who imagined himself in the cockpit of a Convair, F-80 Thunderjet. When we got to the scene, after having gone through a long column of red lights, we found scattered sections of an automobile that had been specially equipped with a bomb under the seat. The bomb had been planted there by a building superintendent who had tired of one of his tenants. The tenant was not that easily destroyed. He came through, more or less alive. A few days later the superintendent, under police custody, visited his victim in the hospital and told him he was sorry about the whole thing.

"A fat lot of good that does me," the tenant said with somewhat more accuracy than charity.

Two weeks ago, a man of about 55 who looked as though he had been made out of scrap iron and old revolver handles dropped in to explain that he had just been sprung from the Tombs; that some old friends had taken the trouble to beat him up his first night out and that he wasn't afraid of nobody, especially cops. He wanted to know why the newspapers suppressed all sorts of important things, like prison conditions and graft among politicians.

"It's a plot," I told him. "But what can I do? I'm just one of the little ones." This cheered him and he left without striking me.

Early this month, a reporter for The News left our just-across-the-way-from-police-headquarters site in quest of a sandwich at 3 A. M. As he stepped from the doorway he was thumped on the skull with what might have been a length of railroad track. He suffered a broken jaw and the loss of his wallet.

So you see there are still places where men are men.

It is impossible to tell a plainclothes detective from a mugger here. You just have to wait to see what they do.

Once a week, on Thursdays, I report to the Forty-third Street office, where I am quite often given two (2) obituaries to do.

It is a life of quiet frustration.

(Heaven forbid that the foregoing be construed as a complaint! The news department abounds in hopeful chaps who would trade me my bed of pain for theirs and throw in two-thirds of their red corpuscles. To these, I must say that my lot is a very happy one, indeed, and add the small comfort that I am not more able than most of them—just taller.)

—John M. Phillips